

Cardamom, the Queen of Spice

By Kate Wheeler



Photo by Cathy Yeulet

Cardamom is one of my favorite spices. It has a rich, strong, pungent aroma and a flowery, almost eucalyptus type flavor. It is also a very old spice. Originating in the Cardamom Hills of southern India, wild cardamom bushes have grown for some 2,000 years. They flourish in rainforests and in some cases can grow to eighteen feet tall. Guatemala is now the chief exporter of the highest quality cardamom pods.

There are three main types of cardamom: green, black and white. Green cardamom has a smooth, blemish-free shell that is completely closed. It is one of the world's most expensive spices and always has been. It has been prized by many cultures, dating back to the Romans in the 1st century A.D. who used it as a breath freshener and digestif.

Black cardamom is aromatic with a hint of smokiness. Camphor can be detected in its aroma. Native to the mountainous area of the Himalayas and stretching to Southern China, it is also grown in Cameroon, Madagascar and Somalia. Black cardamom is mainly used for savory dishes.

Some say that black cardamom is an inferior pod when compared to fancy green, but this simply isn't true. Black pods are spicier and more appropriate for rustic dishes.

Black cardamom can be used liberally and won't dominate a dish; in fact it enhances and intensifies the flavors of the other ingredients. To fully release the flavor of these pods, crush them slightly before using, but not enough to release the seeds themselves.

Bleached white pods are simply the fancy green pods bleached with sulfur dioxide for aesthetic reasons. Scandinavia is the largest importer in Europe of cardamom and they use the bleached white pods to make cookies, muffins, buns and spiced cakes.

Many people buy cardamom ground, which is not the best way to buy it because there are 25 volatile oils inside the seeds to make the flavor we know and love. The best way to release these oils is to freshly grind right before use. Below is one of my favorite recipes involving cardamom, especially served with cardamom coffee.

Sugared Cardamom Pears

Serves 4

- 4 Tbsp. butter
- 3 Bosc pears, peeled, cored and cut into eighths
- ¼ cup brown sugar
- Pinch salt
- ¼ tsp. ground cardamom
- 1 tsp. Madagascar vanilla extract
- Vanilla ice cream, for serving
- Crystallized ginger, for garnish

In a skillet over medium-high heat, add the butter. As the butter melts and begins to foam, add the pears. Cook for two to three minutes until they begin to soften. Add the brown sugar and stir to incorporate the sugar mixture, evenly coating the pears. Stir in the salt, cardamom and vanilla extract, and continue to stir until the liquid becomes syrupy. Transfer to a serving bowl and serve over vanilla ice cream garnished with chopped crystallized ginger.

I hope this has inspired you to try a spice that may be familiar but foreign. Try it in different uses like hamburgers and meatloaves too. Who knows, it could become your new secret ingredient.

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